DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 230 959 CS 207 626

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TITLE Making It Real: The Student as Working Writer.
PUB DATE Mar 83
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (34th, Detroit, MI, March 17-19, 1983).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; Higher Education; Instructional Materials; *Letters (Correspondence); *Mass Media; *Writing (Composition); Writing Exercises; *Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Awareness

ABSTRACT

By incorporating letters to the editor and other reader participation columns in print media into the content-focus of the course, composition teachers can bring to life the student's rhetorical situation, especially with respect to audience and purpose. Such reader-writing is especially effective when students analyze the texts for clues to the implied reader. Reader-writing is equally effective in structuring writing assignments, particularly if the teacher wishes to emphasize the purposes rather than the modes of discourse. Students can be led to see how these different formats can be adopted to suit a variety of purposes. The purpose of a given sample of reader-writing can be classified in one of five ways: (1) to express a considered opinion, (2) to supply needed information to the debate, (3) to correct another contributor's errors, (4) to show connections between disparate issues in order to construct the pattern of a larger issue, or (5) to influence public opinion and policy-making. The frequent reemphasis of these forms of public conversation throughout the course encourages the students to expand their reading and their sense of the world. Integrating the material into the structure of the course also allows for a developmental approach in two ways: from shorter, more restricted "letter" form to larger, more elaborated public essays; and from a concrete, personal community audience to a more abstract, generalized, invented audience. (HTH)

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Making It Real: The Student as Working Writer

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Making It Real: The Student as Working Writer

Composition teachers have always been aware of the problems created by our artificial classroom situation. "English is bound to help you later in life" is about the best most students can do when asked why they should take a comp course; more often, it's simply, "because it's required." Our recent professional emphasis on the rhetorical situation -- especially the roles of Purpose and Audience -- has clarified the significance of this alienation of the comp class from the real world. Yet the alienation seems inherent in the nature of the classroom context, and frustrates our best thinking on theory and pedagogy.

Nowhere is this problem more apparent than in our assignments. No matter what schemes we devise to relate assignments to the "real world," the students know that we are the audience, and their purpose is to get a passing grade. In discussing this dilemma, Timothy Donovan describes assignments which "convey the not-so-subtle message that writing is at best communication and at worst a trivial, make-work exercise...."[1] Donovan localizes the problem in the teacher's limited expectations for the students, arguing that teachers need to see students as writers, and help them see themselves as writers. But I would go further: I propose that we need to help them to <u>be</u> writers-- real writers in real rhetorical situations. We should attack the problem of artificiality by making the situation real.

An interesting phenomenon in the contemporary print media is made to order for the composition class: reader participation is in. The

most obvious format is the "Letters to the Editor" section of newspapers and magazines, and surveys across the country consistently show this feature to be among the most read. Recently, editors have established larger formats -- columns -- for readers to speak their minds. The Portland Oregonian, for example, features two such columns: "In My Opinion," concerned with political issues and carried on the editorial page; and "Point of View," treating cultural and social matters and appearing in the "Living" section. Most college and small town papers have their "Guest Editorials" and "Viewpoints." Magazines have also picked up on the trend; Newsweek's "My Turn" and Penthouse's "Advise and Dissent" are two notable examples. By incorporating this material into the content-focus of the course, composition teachers can bring to life the student's rhetorical situation, especially with respect to Audience and Purpose.

The problems teachers have with teaching Audience primarily grow out of a fundamental split in the way they understand the concept. In his discussion of "The Meanings of Audience," Douglas Park defines the two divergent concepts as: "actual people external to the text, the audience whom the writer must accommodate; (and) the text itself and the audience implied there, a set of suggested or evoked attitudes, interests, reactions, conditions of knowledge which may or may not fit with the qualities of actual readers." Park argues against the "actual reader" approach as inadequate, and prefers the practice of analyzing texts for patterns of rhetorical choices that constitute the implied reader. This seems not significantly different from the standard practice of analyzing professional essays in textbook-readers; students may grasp the concepts, but they do not see themselves "implied." They

are still essentially alienated by the artificiality of the situation.

But these two concepts of audience need not be divergent; they may be integrated by integrating reader participation material -- what I call "reader-writing" -- from the print media into the larger structure of the composition class. With careful planning, the abstract concepts of audience may be brought to life in the student's experience. But integration is a key element in the planning. Unlike advertising or film, which seem to work best when treated as units within the course structure, reader-writing and its collateral material are most effective when integrated at significant points throughout the course.

The teacher might begin a composition course by stressing the importance of "outside reading" in various forms of media. This importance can be reinforced by using several "Letters to the Editor" from the local newspaper as response material for the initial essay assignment. Throughout the course the teacher would use editorials, guest columns, and letters to focus class discussions (I've found this to be most effective when this material is not used exclusively, but in conjunction with professional essays). Reader-writing is especially effective when students analyze the texts for clues to the implied reader; in this way, the audience is both a fiction, created by the writer, and a real community to which the students themselves belong. Discussions can focus on both content and form, because, unlike with professional essays, the content and form of this material are directly related to the students' lives.

Reader-writing is equally effective in structuring writing assignments, particularly if the teacher wishes to emphasize the purposes rather than the modes of discourse. The various formal requirements

of letters, viewpoints, and the more global-oriented "My Turn" allow the teacher to construct a variety of assignments that can be personally engaging for the student. More important, students can be led to see how these different formats can be adopted to suit a variety of purposes. In actual practice, I've found that the controlling purpose of a given sample of reader-writing can be described in one of five ways: (1) to express a considered opinion; (2) to supply needed information to the debate; (3) to correct another contributor's errors (in form or content); (4) to show connections between disparate issues in order to construct the pattern of a larger issue;or (5) to influence public opinion and policy-making. Interestingly enough, these controlling purposes translate roughly into Kinneavy's terms as Expressive, Informative, Scientific, Exploratory, and Persuasive.

But I want to reiterate an important point: while other forms of media are generally treated as units in a comp course, reader-writing works best when it is incorporated into the whole structure of the course. The frequent re-emphasis of these forms of public conversation encourages the students to expand their reading and their sense of the world, an important step toward making their place in it, toward real self-discovery. Through their active involvement with the print media, students learn to see their world as a writer's world, and learn to make a place for themselves in that world by participating in the written conversation which binds the community and moves it forward. Integrating the material into the structure of the course also allows for a developmental approach in two ways: from shorter, more restricted "Letter" form to larger, more

elaborated public essays; and from a concrete, personal community audience to a more abstract, generalized, invented audience. All the while, the student is personally involved, because her writing purpose is genuine, and her audience is a community which includes her as a member.

Integrating reader-writing into the composition class is a powerful resource for overcoming the problem of alienation, and its effectiveness is not limited to the general composition course; it can also help to give real meaning to a research writing course. In a forthcoming MLA collection of essays, Teaching the Research Paper, Richard Larson argues that "the generic 'research paper' as a concept, and as a form of writing taught in a department of English, is not defensible," and bases his argument largely on the assertion that the form has no genuine purpose and audience.[3] Robert Schwegler and Linda Shamoon, in an essay in that same volume, lend support to Larson when they assert that academic research papers "do not focus on altering the values, ideas, or emotional attitudes of an audience or on moving the audience to action of some kind: intellectual, emotional, or physical."[4] The mistake these writers make is a confusion of the potential of the genre of the research paper with its actualization in the typical research paper class. But neither the course nor the papers it produces need be alienated from the real world.

In yet another paper in that same collection, Thomas Gaston describes a set of maxims "designed to place library research and its attendant academic conventions within a larger context of intellectual and economic activity." These maxims are to be presented early in the course in order to orient students to the rhetorical situation of research

writing, to "what kinds of information it communicates to what kinds of audiences for what kinds of purposes."[5]

As we did with Donovan, we can extend Gaston's insights by using reader-writing to develop a real rhetorical situation with a real purpose and audience. An example can best clarify what I mean. First, some background: Oregon is currently undergoing an economic nightmare, and, as with many other states in similar straits, is looking for a solution in the High-Technology industry. While the details of a"strategic plan" have yet to be worked out, business and political leaders have sufficiently committed themselves so that some changes are sure to take place. Portland State University, for example, has been targeted as a hi-tech center, and has already received substantial grants to improve its engineering and computer science programs. All of the research by legislative committees and chambers of commerce centered on economic issues, but such a major shift in the industrial base seemed certain to make a significant impact on the lives of all Oregonians. Unfortunately, these larger issues received scant attention. For my two research paper classes, this great gap in understanding constituted the focus of the research and writing.

I began the course by introducing some items from various print media that described the situation from differing perspectives; these included editorials, news features, and some reader-writing. Using this material as content-focus, we established a genuine purpose and audience for our research papers. Subsequent class discussions and writing assignments, supplemented with a constant flow of media clips provided mostly by the students themselves, helped them to discover points where their own interests converged with areas needing further research. The diversity of their own

backgrounds and interests contributed to surprising and lively discussions and essays. Each student gradually developed an area of expertise that was recognized and consulted by his classmates.

But their efforts were unified by more than subject matter. They chose as their purpose to try to influence the policy-making process that was just beginning to unfold, and their audience would be the civic, educational, and business leaders who would make decisions about policy. These people were identified from the media sources. They would be told about the project and invited to read the papers. Early into the course the students realized the gravity of their task: their papers would be read not only by the teacher, but also by a number of important people whom they had never met; furthermore, their papers would have some impact, either positive or negative, either intended or not, on the future in their community. Some balked at the prospect -- but I should point out that though the course is not required at PSU, and does not even carry general distribution credit, over two-thirds stayed.

As a group, they worked extremely hard, harder than I've ever seen research paper classes work. And the work paid off: the audience response was surprisingly positive. Among those requesting copies of the papers were the president of the state senate, the chairman of a powerful environmentalist lobby, and a documentary producer for the Portland PBS station. My classes this quarter are researching a plan to effect major changes in Oregon's higher education system; already several leaders in the plan who have heard about our project have requested copies of the students' papers. The academic research paper seems to have found a genuine Purpose and Audience.

I've dwelled on one example in order to make another important point about using reader-writing in the classroom: the unique demands it creates for individual composition courses. Each community, each school and geographic locale, will produce differing reader-writing, which in turn will produce its own pastiche of resources and embarrassments. All I can do is suggest some general principles and show some specific examples; an explicit and detailed pedagogy is not possible in this situation. Teachers need to do a great deal of reading themselves; they need to be alert for possibilities that can be effectively exploited in their classrooms. They need to be attuned to the needs, the resources, and the interests of their students and their community.

Obviously, then, for the teacher and the student, using reader-writing in the composition class doesn't reduce the workload. But it does increase the quality of the pay-off. Students enjoy their writing more; they participate actively in the class; and their writing improves, often dramatically. They begin to see writing as extending beyond the bounds of the classroom or even the job, because they are able to adapt their new skills to fulfill their own purposes with a real audience. In sum, writing becomes an important part of their lives.

Notes

[1] Timothy Donovan,"Seeing Students as Writers", in The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook, ed. Gary Tate and Edward P.J. Corbett (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), p.220.

[2] Douglas Park, "The Meanings of Audience", College English, 44 (1982), p. 249.

[3] Richard Larson, "The 'Research Paper' in the Writing Course: A Non-Form of Writing", in Teaching the Research Paper, ed. James Ford (New York: MLA Press, forthcoming).

[4] Robert A. Schwegler and Linda K. Shamoon, "The Aim and Process of the Research Paper", in Ford.

[5] Thomas A. Gaston, "Putting the Research Paper in a Rhetorical Context", in Ford.